

Doing your part

Smog Alert: How to cope with bad air days

Smog is made up of airborne pollutants, the most harmful of which are ground-level ozone and fine airborne particles. High levels of smog can cause coughing, wheezing and tightness of the chest. Elderly people, children and people with heart and respiratory problems are particularly vulnerable.

All of us can take steps to protect ourselves on smog alert days and to improve the quality of the air we breathe.

In southern Ontario, particularly in and around the Greater Toronto Area, periods of smog in summer can cause air quality to fall well below acceptable standards. Smog is that brownish haze that we sometimes see hanging over our community on warm, sunny days.

Smog is a combination of airborne pollutants that affect our health and our natural environment. Most harmful are ground-level ozone and fine airborne particles that can enter our lungs. These contaminants come from vehicles and other gasoline or diesel-powered machinery, factories, chemical sprays, oil-based paints, airborne dust and other sources.

In some people, even mild exposure can cause eye, nose and throat irritations, coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. Smog can lower resistance to infection and cause people with heart and lung conditions to get even sicker. In some cases, it can contribute to premature death.

The Ministry of the Environment has developed a special program to warn Ontario residents when unacceptably high levels of ground-level ozone are present or expected. When the ministry forecasts indicate occurrences of ground-level ozone in excess of 80 ppb (parts per billion) over a wide geographic area, the ministry declares a smog alert.

The Ontario government is committed to protecting and improving our province's air quality. Programs such as Drive Clean and the Ontario Smog Plan will significantly reduce smog levels over the next few years.

But we can all help reduce smog and make the air we breathe safer by taking special actions, especially on smog alert days.

Here are some things you can do to protect yourself, your family and the environment:

1. Reduce car use – all year round

Walk, cycle or take public transit.

Emissions from cars, trucks and buses contribute greatly to Ontario's smog problem. Leave your car at home, if possible, or limit car trips by doing all your errands at once. Hold a tele-conference instead of travelling to meetings.

To reduce your exposure to exhaust fumes, stay away from heavy traffic areas when walking or cycling.

2. Drive Clean

If you must drive, try car-pooling. And keep your car well-tuned. A well-maintained car runs better and pollutes less. Shut the engine off, even for short stops – one minute of idling uses more fuel than re-starting your engine. Drive at moderate speeds and check your tires regularly. Refuel your car after sundown when air pollution levels are lower and gasoline vapours won't add to the problem.

3. Turn off the lights

Generating electricity contributes to smog, so remember to turn off the lights whenever you don't need them.

4. Turn down the air conditioner

Air conditioning uses up energy, some of which is supplied by oil- and coal-fired generators which emit pollutants that contribute to smog. Increasing the temperature in your home or place of work by a few degrees is a small price to pay to reduce hydro usage and help improve air quality.

5. Limit use of small engine tools

You'd hardly think that mowing the lawn contributes to smog, but it does. Small gasoline engines in mowers, chain saws and leaf blowers emit high levels of pollutants that cause smog. On smog alert days put off mowing the lawn to another day. Use electric-powered or, even better, manual tools which don't produce any pollution.

6. Use air-friendly products

Avoid using aerosol sprays and cleaners, oil-based paints and other chemical products that contribute to poor air quality indoors and outdoors. Use less-toxic alternatives: a small cup filled with vinegar and left on a counter top works as well as an aerosol air freshener; a mixture of water and soap flakes works as well as any pest spray to reduce an ant colony. Use latex and water-based paints.

7. Delay exercising

Strenuous exercise, especially during the late afternoon and early evening when smog is at its worst, can cause breathing difficulties and eye and throat irritations even in healthy people. On smog alert days, if strenuous activities or exercise are unavoidable, plan them for early in the morning, and avoid high traffic areas.

8. Stay Indoors

On smog alert days, children, the elderly and people with chronic heart and lung ailments should remain indoors in late afternoon and early evening. Smog levels are highest at this time. Sensitive people may experience eye, nose and throat irritations, chest discomfort, deep breathing and possible lung damage. Try to stay in a room that is cool and moist (but too much air conditioning dries the air).

9. Don't light up on smog alert days

Whether it's lighting up your gas barbecue or, if you're a smoker, a cigarette, the smoke will only add more pollutants and further deteriorate air quality in and around your home. Take a break – don't smoke and enjoy light meals that require little or no cooking.

10. Educate your children

When a smog alert has been called, encourage your children to play outdoors early in the day. Choose play areas away from heavy traffic. Help them plan indoor activities for the late afternoon. Reschedule baseball and other outdoor sports. Talk to your kids about what they can do to help improve air quality.

For further information contact:

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